

RESOURCE GUIDE

Child Marriage and Child Widows in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Humanitarian Response

The following resource guide has been compiled by Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage to support advocacy and action surrounding the elimination of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) during armed conflict and other humanitarian emergencies.

Mohinder Watson, PhD, MPH
ACTION ON CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Copyright © 2021 by Mohinder Watson. All rights reserved. Geneva, Switzerland.



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage

Introduction

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines a humanitarian crisis as “a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country program.” During these situations, the rates of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) often increase, as has been documented amongst refugees displaced by the Syrian crisis and Rohingya refugees living in Cox’s Bazar. The increase in CEFM during humanitarian crises is the result of the loss of livelihoods, real or perceived risk of sexual violence, and breakdown of social structures, among others.

Although the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda acknowledges the need to protect women and girls in conflict and other humanitarian situations, it is silent on specific measures to address CEFM, despite global efforts across UN entities and in UN conventions, declarations, documents and initiatives to eradicate the practice. CEFM is a violation of human rights, a public health and social development issue and a barrier to the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Gender inequality contributes to increased risk of instability and conflict and is thus also an impediment to achieving peace and security. Although there is growing recognition of risks of CEFM in humanitarian settings, there remains a critical gap in consolidating progress and guaranteeing that these efforts ultimately lead to a tangible impact on the ground.¹ Including child marriage and child widows in the WPS agenda is an important step towards ensuring accountability for governments and humanitarian agencies and protecting girls in situations of armed conflict.

Section 1 of this resource guide presents an overview of commitments by States Parties to prevent and respond to violations against the girl child in situations of armed conflict, disaster, and displacement, beginning with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Section 2 outlines policy guidance from literature by relevant humanitarian and human rights groups, including Save the Children, Women’s Refugee Commission, Girls Not Brides, etc. Taken together, this guide offers a basis for advocacy and action to support the inclusion of child brides and child widows in humanitarian response and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

Background

Over the past decade, humanitarian and human rights actors have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of child marriage in situations of armed conflict and forced displacement. Child marriage is a violation of human rights recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Research shows that child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) increase in conflict and other humanitarian settings, with devastating consequences for girls and their families. Since the Syrian conflict began, the prevalence of child

¹ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. (2009). “UN Security Council Resolution 1612 and beyond: Strengthening protection for children in armed conflict.” <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/B47350B9C3111673C12575C9006152B8-Watchlist-PolicyPaper-colour-LOWRES.pdf>.

marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon has almost tripled from 13 percent to 35 percent.² Between March 2011 and December 2017, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented cases of CEFM involving girls as young as 12 up to adults, including widows, who were forced into an unwanted marriage (A/HRC/37/CRP.3). The 2017 Human Rights Council Resolution on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings acknowledges that gender inequality is among the root causes of child marriage, with poverty and lack of education among the key drivers of the practice.

Child marriage is also reported to have increased among the more than 885,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh who fled from ethnic and religious persecution in Myanmar. A GAGE report by Presler-Marshall et al. indicates that child marriage is common among the Rohingya population in camps in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh where girls are married as young as 12 or 13.³ In contrast to the situation in Syria, child marriage was less prevalent in Myanmar prior to displacement due to the Myanmar military's harsh control over Rohingya populations and the large sums often demanded as bribes for marriage certificates by military officials.

Due to the loss of livelihoods for Rohingya refugees coupled with less regulated marriages in the camps, child marriage has become more common. This is likely further fuelled by the expectations of lower or even no dowry for marriage. Religious and cultural preferences for a lower age for marriage were also important considerations as many girls, boys and parents believed girls should be married once they reached puberty. Child marriage may also be inadvertently encouraged by aid agencies who distribute food in the camps by households, so a child marriage would create a new household.⁴

During the COVID-19 crisis, rates of child marriage have further increased, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states. According to World Vision, four million more girls are at risk of child marriage over the next two years as a result of the economic hardships of COVID-19,⁵ and UNFPA estimates that disruptions to child marriage prevention programs due to the pandemic could potentially result in an additional 13 million more child marriages by 2030.⁶ The increase in child marriage is the result of the compounding effects of the loss of livelihoods, school closures, and a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services. This alarming trend highlights the risks to girls facing all types of humanitarian crises from COVID-19 to displacement.

² El Arab, R. & Sagbakken, M. (2019). "Child marriage of female Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: a literature review." *Global Health Action*, 12(1). DOI: [10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709](https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709).

³ Presler-Marshall, E. et al. (2020). "Through their eyes: Exploring the complex drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts." London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence. <https://www.gage.odg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Child-marriage-report-final.pdf>.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ World Vision. (2020). "COVID-19 will put 4 million girls at risk of child marriage." Press Release. <https://www.worldvision.org.hk/en/news/press-releases/Aftershock%20report>.

⁶ UNFPA. (2020). "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage." Interim Technical Note. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf.

Causes and Consequences of Child Marriage and Widowhood

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines child marriage as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. Forced marriages are marriages in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union. Child marriage is considered a form of forced marriage since girls under 18 are considered too young to give consent to marriage.

Although child marriage is context specific, the OHCHR attributes child marriage in humanitarian settings to a variety of causes. These factors include insecurity, gender inequality, increased risks of sexual and gender based violence, the breakdown of the rule of law and state authority, the use of forced marriage as a tactic in conflict, lack of access to education, the stigma of pregnancy outside of marriage, an absence of family planning services, a disruption of social networks and routines, increased poverty, and the absence of livelihood opportunities ([A/HRC/RES/35/16](#)).

The changing nature of warfare has contributed to the rise in CEFM as more civilians today are harmed in conflict than combatants, especially women who are often targeted in acts of sexual and gender-based violence. The fear of such sexual violence whether real or perceived, is one of the many drivers of child marriage in conflict settings, especially in communities where virginity before marriage and family honour are of paramount importance and lead to parents marrying girls off at an early age in the belief that marriage will protect them from such violence and maintain family honour.⁷

Moreover, during conflict, countless women suffer the loss of their spouse and become war widows. Girls who were married at a young age as child brides may become war widows while still under the age of 18 if their husbands are killed in conflict. Child widows are an under-researched and especially vulnerable population in situations of armed conflict. Some child widows are already mothers while still children themselves at the time of their husbands' death, and many are denied their right to inheritance, subjected to social stigma and harmful traditional practices such as widow cleansing, and denied their basic human rights.⁸

While child marriages may be initiated by families who marry girls as a survival strategy during times of economic hardship such as to obtain bride wealth, to have fewer family members to feed, to discharge a debt, or to protect girls from sexual violence, pregnancy outside of marriage and to preserve family honour, girls may also be coerced into forced marriages with and by armed combatants.

The breakdown of societal structures can mean that legal institutions are taken over by armed actors or violent extremist groups. The Islamic State (ISIL) in Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon, and the Islamist

⁷ Spencer, D. (2015). "'To protect her honour' Child marriage in emergencies – The fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence." Care International. https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf.

⁸ Watson, M. (2018). "Millions of child widows forgotten, invisible and vulnerable." http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ChildWidowsReport_2018_Mohinder_Watson.pdf

armed group al-Shabaab in Somalia abducted girls and women to be raped, sold and forced into marriage. From 2014 onwards, Yazidi girls and women were forced to marry members of ISIL (A/HRC/32/CRP.2 A/HRC/37/CRP.3, para.83).

Despite the different contexts of such marriages, forced marriage can overlap with the crime of forced recruitment of children. Moreover, the families and communities of such girls often do not accept their marriages and consider the girls to be tainted by their relations with fighters. In addition, the tens of thousands of children over the past decade born out of child and forced marriages to members of fighting forces and armed groups are often stigmatized, discriminated against, abused, abandoned by family members, and denied basic rights and access to services such as health care and education. This exclusion is a significant consequence of wartime child marriages on future generations: the loss of identity and social exclusion from their families and communities experienced by the children throughout their lives, compounded by their father's perpetrator status and the shame and "pollution" surrounding rape.⁹

Given the many vulnerabilities of child brides and child widows who as minors still have immature bodies and minds, often lack agency over their sexual and reproductive health choices and are exposed to higher risks of child and maternal health complications and physical and sexual violence, it is imperative that they are provided with protection tailored to their specific needs and context. The WPS agenda and its advocates must recognize this critical gap and work to include and protect women and girls during armed conflict and peacebuilding efforts.

The next section provides an overview of some of the key documents highlighting the importance of including child marriage and child widows in the WPS agenda.

Documents Supporting the Importance of Addressing CEFM in the WPS Agenda

Section 1: Government Commitments

1. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The absence of CEFM from the WPS agenda is inconsistent with its foundations in the global gender equality commitments made in the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) in 1995 which recognised the girl child as one of the twelve critical areas of concern who should be supported, protected and encouraged to reach their full potential in the interest of equality, development and peace. The first section of Paragraph 39 of the Beijing Declaration states:

⁹ Mazurana, D., Marshak, A. & Spears, K. (2019). Child marriage in armed conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101(911) 575-601.

“The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded.”

2. UN General Assembly Resolution Banning Child Marriage and the Biannual Resolutions of the HRC and UNGA.

In 2015, the General Assembly approved a landmark resolution banning child, early and forced marriage. Since then, bi-annual progress reports have been presented by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for approval by the Human Rights Council (HRC) and UN General Assembly, highlighting the progress being made in eradicating CEFM.

In the 2017 Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution on child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings ([A/HRC/RES/35/16](#)), the HRC noted with concern that the incidence and risk of child, early and forced marriage is highly exacerbated in humanitarian settings.

The 2019 OHCHR report on child marriage in humanitarian settings ([A/HRC/41/19](#)) states in its concluding paragraph:

“Child, early and forced marriage is a human rights violation, a form of gender-based discrimination, a harmful practice and a form of sexual and gender-based violence, which requires States to take steps to prevent and eliminate it.”

3. Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals

[Goal 5](#) of the SDGs aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. As gender equality is also the foundation for stability and peace, gender equality is central to international peace and security and the WPS agenda to promote and protect the rights of women in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Recognising that CEFM is a barrier to achieving gender equality, the elimination of child marriage is included as SDG Target 5.3 which specifically refers to the elimination of child marriage, FGM and other harmful traditional practices.

4. UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1820

[UNSCR 1612](#) is vital for preventing sexual violence against children and requires “the systematic gathering of accurate, timely, objective and reliable information on the following six grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict” and triggers action by the Security Council and other key actors. It

builds on [UNSCR 1261](#) (1999) on children in armed conflict which outlines grave violations which occur against children during periods of armed conflict. These six violations are:

- (1) killing and maiming of children
- (2) recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups
- (3) sexual violence against children
- (4) attacks against schools or hospitals
- (5) abduction of children
- (6) denial of humanitarian access for children

In situations of conflict and crisis, CEFM can breach some of these grave violations, especially violations (2) to (5) listed under UNSCR 1612 as shown in the following examples.

(2) Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups

In a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch entitled “Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp,” interviews conducted with girls released by Boko Haram highlighted that they had been forced to participate in military operations, including carrying ammunition or luring men into ambush.¹⁰

(3) Sexual violence against children

The fear of sexual violence is a driver of child marriage in situations of armed conflict as parents believe marrying girls early will offer them protection from sexual violence and help preserve family honour.¹¹

(4) Attacks against schools or hospitals

Attacks against schools deny children their right to an education and can result in increases in child marriage in the absence of other options. When schools are destroyed or no longer deemed safe by parents, girls are more likely to be married as children. In Uganda, parents were aware of increased risks of sexual violence during the peak of the conflict and kept girls home from school, thereby contributing to an environment which favoured child marriage.¹²

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch. (2014). “Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp’ Boko Haram Violence Against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria.” http://features.hrw.org/features/HRW_2014_report/Those_Terrible_Weeks_in_Their_Camp/.

¹¹ OHCHR. “Child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. A/HRC/41/19, p. 3. <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/41/19>.

¹² Women’s Refugee Commission. (2016). “A girl no more: The changing norms of child marriage in conflict.” <http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Changing-Norms-of-Child-Marriage-in-Conflict.pdf>.

(5) Abduction of children

The abduction of 276 Chibok girls in 2014 by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria—some of whom were forced to marry armed actors and subsequently raped, and some of whom are still missing—drew international condemnation to acts which had been occurring since 2009.

[UNSCR 1820](#) recognises the use of sexual violence as a weapon and tactic of war. It notes that women and girls are often targeted by the use of sexual violence to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group. Although UNSCR 1820 strongly condemns all sexual and other forms of violence committed against civilians in armed conflict, especially women and children, it acknowledges that sexual violence continues to occur, and in some situations has become systematic and widespread.

5. The CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 30 (2013) on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations.

Although none of CEDAW's provisions refer to the WPS agenda directly, the Preamble states that "the cause of peace requires the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields."

CEDAW General Recommendation 30 ([CEDAW/C/GC/30](#)) on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations affirms CEDAW's linkages with the WPS agenda and offers guidance to States Parties on measures to ensure women's rights are protected during and after conflict. GR 30 also makes clear that CEDAW applies in all types of conflict and post-conflict settings and addresses crucial issues facing women in these contexts, including violence and challenges in access to justice, education, employment and health and refers to the need to address child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings.

In addition, CEDAW GR 30 (para. 57 (d)), urges States to provide protection and assistance for internally displaced and refugee women and girls, including by safeguarding them from gender-based violence and ensuring the availability of education, income-generation and skills training activities.

6. Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 38 of [the Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) states that "States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child." This admonition seeks to ensure that the rights of children are respected during armed conflict and prevent violence against children, including sexual violence and forced recruitment, in line with UNSCR 1612.

7. Article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

In Africa, the continent with the highest number of children associated directly with fighting forces, the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#) (1990), which considers children to be all persons under 18 years,

obligates states to take all necessary measures to prevent the use of children in armed conflict and refrain from recruiting children.

8. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Agreed Conclusions 63-65

[CSW 65 Agreed Conclusions, March 2021](#)

The following paragraphs highlight the importance of eradicating child marriage:

“23. The Commission strongly condemns all forms of violence against women and girls, which is rooted in historical and structural inequalities and unequal power relations between men and women. It reiterates that violence against women and girls in all its forms and manifestations, in public and private spheres, including sexual and gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, gender-related killings, including femicide, and harmful practices, **such as child, early and forced marriage** and female genital mutilation, are pervasive, underrecognized and underreported, particularly at the community level.”

“28. The Commission acknowledges the need to address the effects of armed conflict and post-conflict situations on women and girls, including victims and survivors of sexual violence.”

[CSW 64 Political Declaration, March 2020](#)

In this political declaration, the CSW referred to the protection of women and girls in conflict and their meaningful participation in decision making in peace processes. Paragraph (h) states:

“(h) Strengthening the protection of women and girls in armed conflict and the full, equal and meaningful participation of women at all decision-making levels and at all stages of peace processes and mediation efforts, including in the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts, and recognizing their leadership therein and the need for their enhanced representation in peacekeeping.”

[CSW 63 Agreed Conclusions, March 2019](#)

The following paragraph highlight the need to address the effect of armed conflict and post-conflict situations on women and girls:

“40. The Commission recognizes the challenges faced by refugee women and girls and the need to protect and empower them, including in countries affected by armed conflict and post conflict situations, and the need to strengthen the resilience of communities hosting refugees by providing humanitarian assistance to people in need.”

Moreover, the Commission calls on governments to:

“Eliminate harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage, which may have long-term effects on girls’ and women’s lives, health and bodies, including increased vulnerability to violence and sexually transmitted diseases and which continue to persist in all regions of the world despite the increase in national, regional and international efforts, including by empowering all women and girls, working with local communities to combat negative social norms that condone such practices and empowering parents and communities to abandon such practices, by confronting family poverty and social exclusion, and ensuring that girls and women at risk or affected by these practices have access to social protection and public services, including education and health care.”

The above citations from relevant UN documents and human rights law show the imperative for the inclusion of child, early and forced marriage in the WPS agenda. The following section provides some key reports and articles on child marriage in humanitarian settings which may be useful for advocacy purposes. Regional resources are denoted in brackets following the reference (e.g. [MENA] for the Middle East and North Africa).

Section 2: Useful Grey Literature and Reports on CEFM in Humanitarian Settings

1. “Addressing Data Gaps on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings,” Save the Children, 2019. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/ed-cp/cefm-in-humanitarian-settings.pdf>.
2. “Preventing and Responding to Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: The Global Programme Approach,” UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/GP-2020-Child-Marriage-in-Humanitarian-Settings-FactSheet.pdf>. And Technical Guide available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-technical-guide-2021-v2.pdf>.
3. “Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts,” Girls Not Brides, 2020. Available at: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/959/Child-marriage-in-humanitarian-contexts_August-2020.pdf.
4. “Through Their Eyes: Exploring the Complex Drivers of Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts,” GAGE, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gage.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Child-marriage-report-final.pdf>.
5. “Child Marriage in Armed Conflict,” International Review of the Red Cross, 2019. Available at: <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/child-marriage-armed-conflict>.

6. “‘No Happily Ever After’ What Children Really Think About Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crises,” World Vision, 2020. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/itaw-fy20childvoicereport_10.pdf.
7. “Global Consultation on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings,” UNFPA-UNICEF, 2020. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/72706/file/GP-2020-Child-Marriage-in-Humanitarian-Settings-Meeting-Report.pdf>.
8. “Special Feature: Making Humanitarian Action work for Women and Girls,” Humanitarian Exchange, 2019. Available at: <https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Humanitarian-Exchange-Issue-75-web-version.pdf>.
9. “Ending Child Marriage is Integral to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.” U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security, 2018. Available at: <https://www.wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/14th-US-CSWG-Aug-18-2018-v2.pdf>.
10. “‘To Protect Her Honour’ Child Marriage in Emergencies – The Fatal Confusion Between Protecting Girls and Sexual Violence,” Care International, 2015. Available at: https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf.
11. “A Practitioner’s Guide to Ethical Conduct of Research on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings,” Women’s Refugee Commission, 2021. Available at: http://hopkinshumanitarianhealth.org/assets/documents/Robinson_et_al_2021_Guide_to_Ethical_Conduct_of_Research_on_Child_Marriage_in_Emergencies_15Mar20215.pdf.
12. “Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Yemen,” Women’s Refugee Commission, 2020. Available at: <http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-arab-states-region/> [MENA]
13. “Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab Region: Dynamics, Challenges and Policy Options,” ESCWA, 2015. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1324252>. [MENA]
14. “Stolen Future: War and Child Marriage in Northwest Syria,” World Vision, 2020. Available at: <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Stolen%20Future-War%20and%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Northwest%20Syria-Online.pdf>. [MENA]
15. “Born to Be Married: Addressing Early and Forced Marriage in Nyal, South Sudan,” Oxfam, 2019. Available at: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620620/rr-born-to-be-married-efm-south-sudan-180219-en.pdf>. [Sub-Saharan Africa]

16. "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal," Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/9991/file/Child%20Marriage%20in%20Humanitarian%20Settings%20in%20South%20Asia.pdf>. [South Asia]

Selected Academic Journal Articles

- Bartels, S.A., Michael, S., Roupetz, S., Garbern, S., Kilzar, L., Berguist, H., Bakhache, N., Davison, C., & Bunting, A. (2018). Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: A mixed methods study in Lebanon. *BMJ Global Health* 3, e000509. <https://gh.bmj.com/content/3/1/e000509>. [MENA]
- El Arab, R. & Sagbakken, M. (2019). "Child marriage of female Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: a literature review." *Global Health Action*, 12(1). DOI: [10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709](https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709). [MENA]
- Hunersen, K., Attal, B., Jeffery, A., Metzler, J., Alkibsi, T., Elnakib, S., Robinson, W.C. (2021). Child marriage in Yemen: A mixed methods study in ongoing conflict and displacement. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, feaa144. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa144>. [MENA]
- Knox, S.E.M. (2017). How they see it: Young women's views on early marriage in a post-conflict setting, *Reproductive Health Matters*, 25(1), 96-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09688080.2017.1383738>.
- Melnikas, A.J., Ainul, S., Ehsan, I. et al. (2020). "Child marriage practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh." *Conflict Health* 14(28). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00274-0>. [South Asia]
- Mourtada, R., Schlecht, J. & DeJong, J. (2017). A qualitative study exploring child marriage practices among Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon. *Conflict Health* 11(27). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-017-0131-z>. [MENA]
- Seff, I., Williams, A., Hussain, F., Landis, D., Poulton, C., Falb, K., & Stark, L. (2020). Forced Sex and Early Marriage: Understanding the Linkages and Norms in a Humanitarian Setting. *Violence Against Women*, 26(8), 787–802. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219845523>.
- Sharma, V., Amobi, A., Tewolde, S. et al. (2020). "Displacement-related factors influencing marital practices and associated intimate partner violence risk among Somali refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia: A qualitative study." *Conflict Health* 14(17) (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00267-z>. [Sub-Saharan Africa]

Conclusion

Child, early and forced marriage is a human rights violation, a harmful practice and a form of gender-based violence. It has a higher incidence in humanitarian contexts, with detrimental consequences for the human rights of victims, in particular women and girls. One of the negative consequences of child marriage in humanitarian contexts is that it can lead to girls becoming widowed while they are still children, leaving them as child widows. These child widows are overlooked as vulnerable girls in need of protection and support. States have international legal obligations to address, prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, to ensure human rights accountability and to provide redress and services for survivors. Those obligations continue to apply in humanitarian settings. Addressing child, early and forced marriage is a life-saving intervention with lifelong impact, and adequate funding and human resources should be prioritized for this purpose, alongside food, water, shelter and health services.

Failure to address child marriage and support child widows within humanitarian contexts threatens to leave some of the most vulnerable girls behind, places girls at greater risk during an emergency, deprives them of any chance of a bright future long after it ends and could hold progress back on ending child marriage globally. Of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage rates, 9 are considered fragile or extremely fragile. Seventeen of the top 20 have required an international humanitarian response to crises within the last 5 years.

Given that child marriage increases in conflict and humanitarian crisis, there is a strong imperative for including child marriage and child widows in the WPS agenda and incorporating the elimination of child marriage into National Action Plans. This would ensure greater alignment of the WPS agenda with other conventions, declarations, instruments and initiatives as well as the work of UN entities, which explicitly refer to the need to eliminate CEFM and support the interconnected goals of lasting peace, security, and gender equality.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Jule Voss, Research Assistant at Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage and student at the University of Virginia for editorial assistance.

Mohinder Watson, PhD MPH
Founder, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage
Geneva, Switzerland

Website: <http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/>
Contact: actiononchildmarriage@gmail.com

Published June 2021.